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EN ROUTE

1919-1939

ENROUTE

1919-1939

By H. E. A. PLATT

OXFORD

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PRELUDES

I

If I am mad, I thank my God
For making me as gaily odd
As a few yards of woodland sod.

I took a path among great trees
Ever in prayer upon their knees.
I said, 'I am too young for these.'

Between their upflung arms one space
Of sunlight like a laughing face
Looked down upon our meeting place.

In sudden prayer I shut my eyes
For thought as open as the skies,
Joy like a high wind, blindly wise.

And in my feet I felt begin
A dance that made me leap and spin
And know the deep earth moved therein.

If I am mad, I thank my God
For making me thus gaily odd
As those few yards of woodland sod.

‘Y o u have a God, O wildflower at my feet.
Is he live dust with whom, your trinity,
One are an earth-born rain, a sun-born heat?

Or teach the winds a gay mythology
Where seasons blossom as immortal flowers
In gardens that behind the dawn may be?

Tell me. I would resign mere human powers
Only to understand you when you nod
So gaily and with grace that is not ours.’

‘Someone in passing broke my narrow pod.
He gave me strength and joy to feel the sun,
To work within the earth. He is my God.’

And barefoot through the grass I heard Him run
Racing the wind, and with His sunlit hair
Struck blind I scarcely saw that heedless one.

I had not thought of God as young and fair.

BECAUSE a gale raved from the hill
 I laughed and disobeyed his will
 To feel his strength go past
 High on the ridge at last.

I laughed and whence I came was thrust
 To run, as leaves in autumn must,
 Downhill, athwart the track,
 His fury at my back.

The long, wet grass like weariness
 Might snare my feet but I could press
 On to those raging trees
 Daring the gale to seize

And shake me madly in his fist
 Like any leaf or drop of mist
 Whose ruin fled with me
 In passionate sympathy.

But then I tired and in the wood
 Fell and lay hid as best I could;
 With earth against my skin
 I felt the night begin.

The leaves that crept to cover me
 Were dead, at rest. Too strong was he,
 And they would have me stay;
 Scarce could I come away.

I V

Now silver under hurried skies,
Where all day there has blown a gale,
The sunset, calm as ever, lies.
Now all my heart's loud voices fail,
 Their long discussion dies.

Somewhere a bird sings on; close by
A leaf falls slowly to its rest.
These neither worship nor deny
Their God and yet with peace are blest.
 And one of these am I.

ALTHOUGH with silence too long fettered
I handled a whole armoury.
There—when at last a link had given—
—Hung ready the one blade for me.

I am stray seed blown unreturning,
A dust trod into littleness.
By passing feet I shall be planted
Nor therefore strike one root the less.

AMORES I

I

Now is my love so sure that all the more it strengthens
 Knowing you not truly beautiful.

Beauty is but a statue posed: no fountain playing
 Can be cold as she or emptier.

Hers are the young untried, the ageing truth has frightened,
 Hers are they—and tired, lewd old men.

I I

OFTEN, soon after dawn, the sun must fall
 Across this river, with such gentleness,
 To glance between the curtain and the wall
 And find you here and stay to watch no less
 The depth, the even movement of your sleep.

Soon I must wake and leave you. As I dress,
 Light is your unconcerned, slow breathing, deep
 The soft voice of the river over all.

Now the whole room aches with lonely darkness,
 Now I lie unrested, never sleeping,
 Let me think of nights when all my longing,
 Set strong towards you
 As a south wind comes into this garden,
 Still could find your sleep cool and faint-scented.

There your breathing was like summer branches
 Stirred in the still dusk
 And your face asleep, not wholly darkened,
 Starlit drooping, blossom of the white rose.
 There your lips were warm grapes that had ripened
 All through a hot noon.

Even sleeping you would move towards me
 (As a bank of flowers the wind blows over
 Let the wind come, takes his whole strong motion,
 Suddenly keeps still)
 And in our one bed would we two lovers
 Know the whole joy of sown earth in April
 Busy in the quiet heat or sweetly
 Troubled with showers.

.

Late into the night a wind was moving,
 Shaking the full leaf of happy branches,
 Pleasing secret buds.

Now that the darkness
Listens to silence
(Every wind tired out, the last dew fallen)
Would that still your breasts were my two handfuls,
Would my flank and your small hips' neat fullness
Yet slept together.

.

With how sure a joy these summer mornings
Wake, the sunrise touching open roses.
You must wake alone now. Even daybreak
Cannot but taunt me.

IT is best like this—
—That I wear still wise cowardice
And you your formal courage
When we meet.

So we sit often talking,
Looking sometimes
Towards the mountains broken down with gullies
And streams gone astray on the plain.

Once we both gladly travelled such country,
We were very gay there,
But it was not together that we went
And it will not be together that we go again.

Though you only read this many years later
You will know to whom I wrote it.
You will know and not regret
It has only this to say.

OUT of the night I came
Away from open ground and a clear sky—
—Ahead, like embers in a furnace
Heaped up, this lighted town.

Down the last hedge there passed
A wind that seemed to take leave once for all:
Lamp after lamp kept watch upon me,
The blazing stars were dulled.

Even then all this road
Was haunted by the parting we would know.
Still was my whole thought how I loved you.
Would it were now but that.

LONG hours since has a young moon setting
 Left asleep by the tireless river
 Houses sad as tombs, in heaped shadow,
 Quiet as ruins.

Here and there under empty arches
 Lamps are still on watch still must waken;
 Built of stars the whole sky above me,
 Lit like a city.

Many here the nights I must weary
 Eyes unsleeping, the heart as restless,
 Slowly tracing a foreign script of
 Far constellations.

Sometimes now through the town there hurry
 Timid lights with huge darkness haunted
 Or a falling star's inspiration
 Burns for one moment.

Ah, my love, could but you be with me
 Then wholly ours were this contentment
 Sung in jewelled phrases of starlight,
 Moving with slow rhythm

Through the summer night's splendid diction.
 We would know how the town below us,
 Feeling this river's arm flung round her,
 Sleeps in such quiet—

—We, who then were like fixed stars always
 Sure of peace, sure to be together
 All night long and, in night's indifference,
 Sure of each other.

IMPULSES

STILL heat suppressed under low trees
All along the water;
And only hot rock on the ridge of the island.

Salt rot in the wind,
Warmth in the rank sea;
Low pulses of the tropic tide turned back
Upon their shallow circulation.

But the young rice
Strong, blazing green;
Behind rapt inlets the backwater
A blue inspired.

This run of youth in my blood
Once known here, here recorded,
Death and the very after-death
Now at least I defy.

ONLY enraptured with effort
 The blood learns its wisdom.
 The taut, driven nerve may see clear, attain vision,
 Once tree of thought.

Frost upon steel was the river
 I washed in at starting,
 The cold like a bruise on each foot. A first twilit
 Half-hour I rode—

Dawn's glint of ice for horizon
 And thence, flooding by me,
 In one steady current the chill of the morning,
 Stars to the west.

Then did the hills wake. Their headlands,
 With shadows in ambush,
 Looked east and forgot from that moment the threatened
 Slopes' firth of dusk.

Then from ahead there came daybreak
 Unconsciously reasoned—
 —The force of blind longing, a heart's slow conviction—
 —There centred light.

So, as I stooped to my girthing,
 Shone suddenly detailed
 My horse's grey flank with the tightening buckle,
 Bright earth below.

So, when I turned and remounted,
The hillside had kindled.
White-heat blown to flame was the east and to westward,
Blank through the sky,

Radiant that blank, like a snowfield.
And then at last sunrise
With colour inspired the least stone, gave to distance
Visions of light.

Good to ride ever in sunlight
And always have with me
My horse like another live self—to feel sinew
Braced but at rest.

Good to ride on still, though morning
Might leave the sky molten,
Hot distance translucent with haze, nearer desert
Fused to one glare.

Motion and sound of my going
A rhythm unbroken;
Alternate with quiet the wind's even cadence;
Ranged down the sky.

Hills huge as cloud, against cloudless
Blue calm of clear weather,
Or massed like a storm and with shadows of colour
Lit in slow change.

Only enraptured with effort
The blood learns its wisdom.
The taut, driven nerve may see clear, attain vision,
Once free of thought.

WROUGHT metal struck is the bazaar's whole sound,
So shrill this tireless wrangle of tapped copper,
So grave these arguments of hammered iron.

More than the crowd it peoples crowded air
(Archway to dome hawks louder yet its copper,
Struck dumb are our mere words by angry iron).

In this absorbed live air still let the copper
Deafen with rapid speech and leave dead iron
Repeating with a latent rage dull sound.

Round us, in hidden courtyards, the same air
Was all this time alone—the listening air
That heard aright too long debated sound.

There learn to judge mock energies of copper,
Interpret rhythmical, fanatic iron.

W R I T I N G here late at night,
(The lamp turned low, a secret, for fear my window
Open on restless trees and then but distance,
Let it flare once in vain and so go out).

What if I wholly fail,
Against a sane indifference who pit unreason
Yet must believe this heart, once rightly uttered,
Lasting as history, worth all my life?

Fallen at last the wind;
Beyond the still trees night is aware of starlight.
O deep unrest, O re-inspired, rare moments,
They who once know you dare not wholly fail.

WOULD I might leave now,
Never end another spring here,
Turn from these watching mountains, the sown plain,
and not look back.

Only too soon now
Burns to death the judas-blossom,
Wake from their snow the upper gullies, flooding in
one night.

Time to be leaving:
What were ecstasies, when first known,
Prove but a yearly mood. I would not test that yet
again.

O to be leaving
Now, the mood but just beginning,
Now, here at least immortal still the myth of its gay
youth.

LANDSCAPES

Two great ridges,
The further a presence winged with snow,
Under the sky of sunlight.

And long tracks, the river, all the lines of the
country,
Lead to a proud bridge,
A sudden town self-centred in one hill—

—The minute, indisputable signature
Set to a masterpiece.

THE palm of my hand, this empty country,
Cut with inscrutable lines.

The foot-hills (there far off, a coast deserted,
And there, above the other town, a wave that breaks)
Rush by here with the light into a sunset, flooding.

And here too there is always
My unself-conscious body
I am so much alone with,
I know so little.

A t sunset crows fly cawing
 Against snow on the ridge
 And below them, through the city,
 Go cars with their urgent horns
 Sounded again and again.

Blandly the electric light watches
 Where I work late
 In this separate upper office.

Could words now reach
 A crisis of expression,
 Like that of sunset fused with snow
 And burnt to ashes in clear flame,
 I might not hear sardonic thought call vaguely
 Nor need ever to shape another line,
 Lulled in these sure mechanics by a live,
 immediate city.

To feel, that noon, at last in shade of trees,
Like a pack flung off,
Hot sun no longer heavy on my shoulders;

Only to hear
An empty laughter from the mule-bells,
The thoughtless stream in idle conversation;

To ride on into sunlight,
One peak ahead
A lifted eyebrow of old snow;

These were enough then—now they would not be
enough.

I must never go back there.

AMORES II

W H A T E V E R comes of this, regret it never.

Now it is near dawn and we have not slept yet.
Often last night an urgent rain poured down;
Often your house, hushed in forgotten by-roads,
Yet in less happy rooms than this long restless,
Heightened with fear my strong possession of you.
Still we lie touching. It is near dawn now.

To have denied me this were your true self's denial.
Not to have dared take this were my true faith betrayed.
Whatever end this has, regret it we shall not.

ONLY as your lover
Do I dare be truly gay—
—Ah, the broad smiles of your hip.

Our little gestures,
Making love,
Are shared, like small, secret jokes;
This horseplay of instinct between our bodies
Is the one eternal humour;
Only now is my heart
Freed of profound, hid laughter.

THE lorries pull in here for shelter:
Ahead the road is rumoured bad.

Speed for a time from both loves, coward lover.
Yours no choice to break with either, true divided
heart.

Southward the bright plains' ebbing colour:
Northward steadfast ranges under snow;
Here, in between, the mud-built resthouse.
O and this is saner than her bedroom—
—Very freedom, thought of by the other's
fireside.

Who are you to risk decision, lonely, restless
blood?

The lorries pull in here for shelter:
Ahead the road is rumoured bad.

THIS spring the river there will not have flooded.
Once, last year, it broke and levelled steep banks,
And we watched the current swerve right out of its channel,
Stumble on rock, and bolt, and head for the plain.

Then was our living headlong, a brave panic,
Then was our loving an inspired intrigue.
Deeper though later love be we must never
Dare disown this, our outlawed, gay amour.

ANGERS

ONE loud main street, blatant as a fair-day:
Petty gardens cramping one another:
Short-sighted windows evilly competing
Here to overlook, there to secrete.

Small rooms always watching the one street-front,
Seeing only that, shut from each other:
Great aisles arching silence, the high windows
Open to a blank wall's narrow light.

AN eagerness for games your only ecstasy,
Lull judgment with complacent muscle tired,
Looking down from horseback, that viewpoint out
of date.

For the instinctive art of talk
Choose drugging
With cards and their barren mathematics:
To music that is communal experience
Prefer flawed intercourse by treated drinks.

The choice was free and you have chosen.

But, that you make a local patriotism,
Well-tailored ritual, hospitalities,
Worth more than hard thought
Or a high and troubled faith,
This brings athwart your stream in its short flood
The patient justice of stark economics,
That glacier toiling at our very source.

UNDER the hill of planted woods run wild,
 Above the drained marsh rank from yearlong rain,
 This ruined house had once its own fit life—
 —To change, like growing mould,
 Earthbound with deep-laid stone.

But you restore here,
 You would deform an elemental process,
 The right of earth to let decay—
 —You who shore up dead faiths
 When ritual alone has been left standing
 And act by blind, adapted usage
 And mend the prettiness of small antiques,
 Since none of these
 Will test you with splendid, dangerous changes.

To this appreciates
 The invested prejudice of years, and it is thus
 Fears for the comfort of mere old age
 Deflect with compromise
 The inspired resultant of inevitable truths.

D R I V E by, exploiter,
You single, mechanised purpose,
Undiscerning as desire.

Or ride aloof tracks
To frame in foreign skyline
Ideals untested.

Experience passed at a distance:
No steady growth, nor from deep soil:
Soon a lost, hurrying dust.

DECISIONS

You have a hard faith to keep
 Who see as far and clear
 As only revolt dares see.

The deliberate choice you must make
 Of a back street and hidden waste ground
 As the truth of all our triumphing cities:
 Your groping lives of argument
 In narrow rooms, in soiled air:
 The incompetent hurry for death
 That leaves us
 But shouted thought they will talk down as madness.

I may not stand with you, nor do you need me—
 —I who have borrowed my life
 On the security of service pledged
 To what you will deny with a chosen death;
 Who, from your subsidised wrongs,
 Draw now accruing comfort.
 But here shall this much be recorded.

It is those deserts
 Hold latent in drought
 The fertility for each re-birth:
 From such manure germinate
 Basic, live forces:
 Your lonely courage is worth all
 Of our drilled effort,
 For loyalty that has its known rewards.

ENLISTED by these livelihoods
In mere comfort's cause
We let run underground
Springs of angry strength.

A time comes
When sure, private faith
One vote from our professional thought will silence;
When the brave truth spoken
Cannot be blaspheme, is a treason.

Now I will remember how our true force,
That knows not any defeat or last victory
But the full life of change unending,
Comes, aloof as dawn, from the hid cumulative
And is strong as spring in its recurrence.

Our conscious thought
Is less than earthworms know
Of how rain in late summer
Affects the marketing of corn grown over them.

And this mean patriotism of ours
Was no more planned for by the deep-sea life,
Now but a chalk dust sloping
Our native hills,
Than it shall rank
With the trends of that real, instinctive purpose.

L O U D sound resolute streams
 Outrunning thought
 Each side of a straight road
 That reaches for the mountains—
 —A new road to bound the coming city,
 Whose whole conception is for open sunlight,
 Whose inspiration
 Was the long prospects of one lasting view.

Now in blank doubt
 The ashen mist walls off
 That peak's achievement,
 The ridges worn to grace by their set purpose.

Wherever there shall come
 Regret for the peace of this inaction
 (Whether in the crisis of failure
 Or lost among tired purposes at war)
 My comfort it must be that inert sky
 Weighed on these hours thus heavily.

WITHOUT the rebel's driving hail of courage,
Inept with supplied tools of thought long trained,
My life is test of little: no wrong pays me
The compliment of hatred or of fear.

At least I will secrete within me truth—
—Some utter truth, impartial as the sea—
—To give at last, in evidence for the future,
To speak sometimes, into their faces, before I am silenced.

AMORES III

THE curtained window giving
 Upon full sunlight
 Is itself in shade.
 But for a dug course for the casual stream,
 Here would be only stone dry earth is breaking,
 Never a garden.

Grown old now
 All introspection from these many books :
 Less than skin-deep
 The ideas fixed in my small pictures.

Only together
 Can we free into the future
 Our elemental force for change.
 Rests upon this
 The right of private happiness
 We have dared claim.

Certain as pain, distinct as heat or cold,
 The second's pagan gesture
 Between our naked hearts.

LIKE dust the wind of living drove me far.
Now I lie deep, here at the dust-storm's centre.

Lie back. After this I shall never ask
To ride again, my horse and I at one,
Or swim again with heavy, tropic breakers
Warm over me, moved inly.

Like dust the wind of living drove me far.
Now to this one lamp, here by your bed,
Be narrowed all my skylines' empty light.
Here be forgotten even
Those plains in sunlight, ecstatic with sharp silence,
That mountain distance scarred with radiant snow,
Now I lie deep, here at the dust-storm's centre.

THIS house at a turn in the river
 Has round it, inconsequently lovely,
 The dusty oleanders;
 The stream passes by here
 Alert, on its way.

We question nor the silting current,
 Nor blossom in disorder in a hot wind.
 We live together, we lovers,
 The meaning of our love its living,
 Mere life the reason we love.

I V

Now is to possess one another
Not so much nerves in ecstasy
As the new blood of a cure succeeding.

First possession
Was the tide coming in
Where old, idle gulfs
Had made a lake of the sea.

But now
Charged hearts run sweetly,
Re-charge off their own power.

From the river that goes deep unconsciously
Straight past this house comes a street
To where all day the main road
Floods like a vein with intent traffic.

And at night, out of silence,
Cars pass with no horn sounded,
Certain and self-contained,
And our unthinking quiet steers us
Out into tidal sleep.

ALL I can ever write
Has no more chance to last
Than the faint pencil on rough paper
Recording this.
Torn scraps of catchword,
The line that many purposes misuse,
Such are the best of its hopes.

Inexpressible are your gestures
Of infinite life, of immediate loveliness,
The vision in my moods.

With our child born,
To genius may yet converge
These, our two urgent trends,
Or to infinity be raised,
Innate as race, their motifs.

A L O N G this road of the town
Come only routine sounds
And our room is intimately hushed.
Waits in you
To end with birth its first experiment
The life that you have formed from me.

In this new testing of us
Still be our search
For the moment's storm of vision,
The second's flooding suddenly pregnant.

It is that vision
High wind and the quick river always follow:
White by that vivid sea are radiant cities
Sometimes the passing unreturning traveller
finds.

BELIEFS

HORN, dead slow, gear-change;
 Gathered power, gear-change;
 Speed, shrill metals, speed, speed, air-flow, speed
 into the distance.

Instinctive as a horseman's the apt hand,
 Daring the judgment as his ever was,
 Nor here his groping, taut preoccupations.

Watch. The first, faulty streamline has not yet
 A schooled fitness, like the thoroughbred's.
 Once to have seen this they shall long years hence,
 As we have longed to see in movement, judge
 Those riders jotted round archaic urns.

Horn, dead-slow, gear-change;
 Gathered power, gear-change;
 Speed, shrill metals, speed, speed, air-flow, speed
 into the distance.

A ROAD finds this valley
 Climbing down from the gap
 Two ridges set ajar.
 Suddenly the town stands looking up
 From under these ridges
 And those, longer and higher, beyond it.

And through the town a river
 Comes from leisured avenues of cypress
 (Standing mock solemn,
 Shading tangled pleasure in old gardens)
 To where the valley's end
 Is all one lake, dead-still.

Only the ruin of these foot-hills
 Could forge a watershed;
 The many lost springs
 Relentless desert uses and lets die;
 Yet here is force for living,
 First gathered blindly, a snow-drift,
 Then fanatic with the flood of streams,
 Subtle at last in every well-spring.

This town, so often planned as a city,
 Returning earthquake has conquered and thrown together
 Again and again.
 Still the huge pressures of empty country
 Form at their centre lasting jewels,
 Build here in a miniature proportion.

From the upper valley
No cypress watches.
Proud as high standards furled the poplars keep
Perfection hid in their small meadows
Or vines camp out upon a lazy slope
All the long summer
Maturing improvident, quick wits for their strong
wine—
—Those vines that seem to winter
Roots left dead in ruined ground.
A force of full living is here.

RARELY do I face the real earth,
 Whose life-blood is chill damp,
 The pulse of whose slow life is decay.
 In gardens or any landscape
 I only find
 The surface-detail of growth
 And abstract distance.

I must dare know
 This ever dying flesh
 Certain of after-life as wild-flowers are of seeding.
 The stones shall loll
 Upon my rotted body and regret
 That not for them so deep a change as death,
 Such ecstasy of quick decay.

The huge invisible, already shadowing me,
 And, at the last, deep ground
 Hold for my force their own infinities.

G R O W out in reasoned facets,
 Crystalline cities,
 Your forces held in solution.
 Under the compression of massed atoms
 Rise, balanced but alert,
 To re-combine the future
 Along sure lines of impersonal design.

Grow from live instinct,
 Deep-rooted cities,
 Each with a style's evolved flora,
 Detached climates of thought.
 Only in you
 Comes to full flower
 The international, the grafted strength of culture.

But be strong, O cities,
 To set those steady lights
 Above your present glare of half-lit smoke—
 —To range them high
 And surely as Orion astride a summer dawn.

It is your planning must quarry
 Profound strata of countryside
 Silted too deep with tradition,
 Too comfortably overgrown.

EACH inbred State
 Affects us like hereditary disease:
 Injustice breeds contagious violence,
 Secreted faults must rot all peace.

Still like a life-blood
 Is the intercourse of our true selves—
 —Opinion with a latitude
 Wide as from love to hate:
 Action conditioned always
 By those restraints innate in a free contact.

Though now infected is reason
 By an endemic war;
 Though we rave with fever
 In these horrors of our own shaping:
 Germs that to death prey mutually on germs
 Yet shall leave clean at last a tested body.

THE strides of pylon
 Clear this hill and leave behind the village.
 A dipping climb, one turn, an urgent dive,
 Pilot the cables of new power to break these skylines.

As forcibly had alien roads to cut
 First causeways into the marsh
 Or hedgerow to map free hillside.
 As foreign, in their time,
 Seemed the plantations of crowded sapling
 Where with no need of purpose a heath
 Lived solitary, content to breed but native turf.

The park has ruined a proud, empty house but ended
 By ranging between suburbs
 Shade for their rest
 From arches of chosen timber.

The brutal embankment learns
 Not to exploit
 Accepted now as fully as a contour.

With true furrows, by strict hedging,
 These disciplines have given
 Fields the finished comfort of gardens
 And landscape a build
 Proof against rash unrest.

Each violence was energy released,
Less against an individual moment
In terrors of change
Than for slow earth to move by its own gravity
Nearer essential peace.

The stressed line of form from use,
A living technique in growth,
These are sound roots of beauty,
These have truth for ground-plan.

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